

The Political Spin of Conviction: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Origin of Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has flared a match of accusation between U.S. and China. Both of the nations have alleged each other for the origin of the virus and the incompetence to contain it within the respective national boundary. The allegations have emerged at a critical period when the virus has infected the entire global population. The study identifies a political discourse, that is, ‘Lab origin theory’ out of these allegations and investigate the form, structure, and pattern of language in use following the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis. The article contends that these allegations are based not on facts but on conviction, opinions, and beliefs which are expressed in the ‘spin’ or turn of retaliatory responses. Forming a series of exchanges these allegations promote certain truth-claims which are, in fact, subjective interpretations and hypothetical assumptions of the origin of Covid-19. The claims of ‘Lab origin’ are established with certain linguistic strategies and symbolic models, and their nature can be only understood with the phenomenon of Post-truth. The concept of Post-truth has been developed against the backdrop of controversial as well as political events of Brexit vote and the U.S. presidential election in 2016. Like these events, Covid-19 is an occasion of Post-truth and its Lab origin theory is a compromise between fact and belief.

Keywords: Politics; Post-truth; Covid-19; Controversy; Critical Discourse Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The origin of Covid-19 has remained controversial (Conforti et al., 2020; Beaumont, 2020). There exist as many as ten conspiracy theories (Lynas, 2020). These controversies have proliferated on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter —leading to direct —real-world action (Downing et al., 2020). The present article forms a discourse of a Lab origin theory out of the exchange of accusations between the U.S. and China. Senator Tom Cotton and President Donald Trump in the U.S. have asserted that Covid-19 originated in a lab in Wuhan, China while Ambassador Cui Tiankai and Director Lijian Zhao of China have suggested that the virus has spread from a U.S.-based lab through the U.S. army to Wuhan. The paper uses critical discourse analysis of these allegations to argue that the materiality of these discourses can only be understood in the discursive phenomenon of post-truth. Post-truth is a discursive situation in which “objective facts are less influential ... than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Languages, 2016), “bullshit or —misrepresentation, half-truths and outrageous lies” become “unchallenged” (Ball, 2016, p. 10), and people are “compel[ed] ... to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 12). The pandemic of Covid-19 has witnessed several interpretations and apprehensions of its origin, impact, and future. While the scientific investigations are yet to offer a unanimous, objective, and rational explanation of the origin of Covid-19, Senator Tom Cotton and President Donald Trump of the U.S. and Ambassador Cui Tiankai and Director Lijian Zhao of China have delivered speculative statements over it. In the absence of verified and acclaimed factual evidence, their statements are subjective and reveal the objectionable nature of truth despite being asserted or confirmed by the first-person speaker itself. In these statements, these

top officials have outweighed facts with emotion and personal belief and called into question the traditional form of truth-claims which are based on facts and evidence. Since personal belief and conviction can only be expressed through rhetoric and specific use of language, the study examines the form, structure, and character of the discourses to reflect on the [post] truth in the lab-origin theory of Covid-19.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term, Post-truth, has been in currency since its first use in 1992 (Oxford Languages, 2016) but became prominent in 2016 on the occasion of Brexit and U.S. Presidential election (McIntyre, 2018, p. 1; Fuller, 2018, p. 6). There are many philosophical and sociological factors behind the rise of the phenomenon of Post-truth: one, the denial of science over the past several decades for the scientists' non-empirical beliefs, economic interest behind scientific research, and ideological prejudices in the choice of facts (McIntyre, 2018, pp. 17-34); two, cognitive biases that expose people to manipulation and exploitation (p. 62); three, the decline of traditional media for the decrease of trust in media, confusion with alternative media such as social media, harsh criticism, and a general doubt on the source and motivation of information (pp. 85-87); and four, the postmodernist approach of deconstruction and idea of knowledge as an activity of power, and social constructivism targeting the validity and status of discipline and knowledge (pp. 123-130). In short, public distrust over the validity of science, relevance of information, and authenticity of media at the turn of the century give rise to post-truth.

Post-truth is associated with scandal, controversy, and fake news. Its first usage was in relation to "Iran-contra scandal" (Oxford Languages, 2016). Then, in 2016 the term is voted "word of the year" to address the practice of deceit, conspiracy and fake news in the context of Brexit and U.S. presidential campaign. In Brexit, the Vote's Leave Campaign used two misleading slogans - U.K would save £350 million a week for the NHS and "Turkey is joining the EU"- to deepen the concerns of immigration and unemployment following the negative outcome of the referendum (Ball, 2016, pp. 42-46). Daily Express's articles on 12 million immigrations from Turkey and Daily Mail's fake-photo of a lorry packed with people smuggling into Britain supported not only the unchecked deceitful propaganda but also the false assertions on Facebook and Twitter (pp. 46-47). Similarly in Trump's electoral campaign, the claims with dubious fact and statistics on America's 42% unemployment rate, \$300 billion a year saving on pricing policy of drugs, huge tax-cuts, 250,000 refugees, and "2,000-mile-long land border ... to tackle illegal immigration ... [to] be paid 'by Mexico'" helped Trump win the election anyway (pp. 20-22). Apart from false claims, Trump refused the American mass media such as CNN and *New York Times* by calling them "fake news" and placing news feed of electoral campaign on Facebook he attracted users on the basis of revealed preferences (Fuller, 2018, p. 3).

Like Brexit and U.S. Election, the event of Covid-19 is political. In fact, keeping Covid-19 away from politics would be "deeply problematic" because the virus may not be political, "but the response to it" is (Kester, 2020). Furthermore, such newspapers as *The New York Times* and *The Global Times* have contributed to the politicization of Covid-19 by prioritizing the national interests and ideologies over informing the reading public (Abbas, 2020). Politics is inherent in the nature of the crisis in public health security. However, health emergency response during Covid-19 is complex on the prospect of its financial impact, public reaction, challenge to health agencies, and the lack of human resources to perform "disease containment strategies" (Stratton, 2020, p. 119). The crisis has exposed the weak state capacity of democratic governments like the U.S. and the U.K in "pandemic preparedness" (Kavanagh and Singh, 2020, pp. 1-9). Public health insecurity and crisis in the U.S. have resulted from such

strategic errors as dismantling of National Security Council's infectious diseases unit that takes preparatory and precautionary measures to prevent future epidemics (Kester, 2020). In China the outbreak has put CCP's political legitimacy in question (Zhou, 2020). After the SARS crisis in 2003 the reconfigured public health system, decrease in funding for research and disease prevention, "violence against doctors", and a "market model for financing health services" resulting in limited access by rural migrants have made the overall public health vulnerable to "a number of infectious diseases, and their spread" including Covid-19 (Zhou, 2020). In both the U.S. and China internal politics driven public health-care policies have failed to respond to the crisis. In this regard, Covid-19 can be viewed as an aftermath or product of internal state politics.

Misleading statements, fake news and refusing genuine information by calling it fake have become the most prominent character of the responses to Covid-19. But this character had also been reported during 2018's outbreak of Ebola in Congo. Conspiracy theories on social media divided the claims between the origin of the disease – "virus was manufactured in government labs by former President Joseph Kabila Kabange in order to drive down voter turnout during the past election" and its non-existence – "it is just a story invented by the private mining corporations as a means of controlling the country's flow of natural resources" (Stokes, 2020). In order to check the spread of panic the autocratic governments like Russia, Iran, Thailand, Zimbabwe and the democratic ones such as Hungary, South Africa, Bolivia have also followed a strategic tool that includes "restricting information, criminalizing independent reporting and harassing reporters" (Diehl, 2020). Under the circumstances of crisis like a pandemic when governments act on prohibitory roles such as surveillance on social media platforms, public lose trust in the midst of restriction and punitive measures. Hence, the association of Covid-19 with Post-truth is relevant because the pandemic has engendered a socio-political situation where fake news, misinformation and conspiracy have arrived at the centre of politics affecting the relation of the government with its subject and foreign countries.

Covid-19 has been associated with the phenomenon of Post-truth in a number of newspaper articles (Loftus, 2020; Lugo, 2020; Kester, 2020; Diehl, 2020; Greenhough, 2020; Yu, 2020). Loftus (2020) finds that the pandemic of Covid-19 has been instrumental in disclosing an emergent form of truth, Post-truth, which can be seen in the tendency to refuse the concern of Covid-19 by calling it a "hoax" by the U.S. President Trump and some right wing U.S. media such as Fox news (Loftus, 2020)). Post-truth is controversial in nature but controversies on the occasion of an epidemic are not unprecedented. Sonya Stokes (2020) states that Ebola outbreak in 2003 and Chung (2011; quoted in Nor & Zulcafli 2019) concludes that SARS witnessed such controversies. Controversy, fake news, and misinformation during Covid-19 have produced two scenarios: one, the reports by independent journalists on Covid-19 has been declared false by Trump Govt.; and two, governments like Saudi Arabia have issued punitive measures to check false information and punish rumourmongers who spread rumours will face five-year jail and be "fined SR3 million (\$800,000) under measures to counter false information regarding the coronavirus pandemic" (Arab News, 2020). Both of these scenarios are detrimental to truth and allow political manipulation. Kester (2020) argues that in the media the U.S. political leaders' blatant charges on Russia and China constitute —our post-truth moment when the medical emergency in U.S. and U.K is the result of —Western neoliberalism (Truth, Posttruth and COVID-19). Under the concern of fake news when top government officials and the Government of China denied the genuine alerts by calling them "rumour" "eight doctors from Wuhan ... [were] transformed from being rumourmongers to whistleblowers and heroes within a month". Yu (2020) articulates the worry of Chinese people in the post-truth era about "where to find truth and voice facts". Greenhough (2020) recommends that in the post-truth times of Covid-19 such plea for truth can only be addressed in "a position of criticality" in order "to challenge perceived truths" amidst fake news and

misinformation”. Newspapers like *The Washington Post* in U.S. and *The People’s Daily* in China are on the run to “politicise the pandemic” in order to pass the blame to the foreign country and to support the ideological and political regime of the nation (AlAfnan, 2020, pp. 58-59).

Furthermore, Covid-19 has engendered a match of accusations between the U.S. and China. These accusations have led to “a potential tragedy in U.S.-China relations and a potential tragedy for the world” (Christensen, 2020, p. 2). The present research uses a critical discourse analysis of these statements on the origin of Covid-19 because none of the above-mentioned articles has looked into the linguistic strategies that compensate for the lack of evidence and factual truth and constitute the post-truth narrative of conviction in the origin of the virus at a foreign lab.

MATERIALIZING THE DISCOURSE OF LAB ORIGIN THEORY

“New debates, discussions and disturbing developments” of the pandemic around the world have prepared the “fertile ground for rumors and conspiracy theories” (Ali, 2020, p. 376). Lynas has identified the following conspiracy theories – ‘The 5G Connection’, ‘Bill Gates’s plot to vaccinate the world’, ‘Leak of the virus from Wuhan Lab’, ‘a biological weapon’, ‘The US military import’, ‘Genetically modified crops’, ‘COVID-19 doesn’t actually exist’, ‘a plot of “deep state” of America to undermine the president’, ‘a plot by Big Pharma’, and ‘Inflated death rate’ (2020). All of these theories point at the motif of origin of the virus. However, the study combines a number of conspiracy theories on the basis of a thematic analogy among them. The following three theories - ‘Leak of the virus from Wuhan Lab’, ‘a biological weapon’, and ‘The US military import’- talk about the origin of Covid-19 in a lab. The Lab origin theory has also been a focal point of the match of accusations between the U.S. and China.

The Lab Origin theory has come into existence when *The Washington Times* published an article, “Coronavirus May Have Originated in Lab Linked to China's Biowarfare Program”, by Bill Gertz on 26th January 2020 (Brewster, 2020). The theory gained publicity after two weeks of suppression in an interview of the U.S. Senator Tom Cotton with Fox news on 16 February (Fordham, 2020). In the interview Cotton casts doubt on the place of origin of the virus by linking two premises of the outbreak: one, several of the original cases did not have any contact with that food market and two, China has a lab on human infectious diseases few miles away from the market. But the study finds that Senator Cotton has first presented the Wuhan lab theory in the Senate of Arkansas on 30 January 2020. Therefore, the study has selected the first speech which has informed the interview on 16 February 2020. The speech is obtained from a video-recording posted in Senator Cotton’s YouTube channel (Cotton, 2020). In response to Senator Cotton, Chinese Ambassador Cui Tiankai brushes off the Wuhan lab origin theory and confirms another rumour of the virus’s origin at the U.S. lab on 9th February 2020 during an interview at ‘Face The Nation’ program (Face The Nation, 2020). Following him, Lijian Zhao contends that the virus was imported by U.S. army to Wuhan on 12 March (Zhao, 2020). Besides, he dismisses the accusation of cover-up by contending that China has been transparent about the details of the outbreak and cooperative with the world in sharing the genetic sequence of the virus. Finally to support the arguments of Senator Cotton President Trump has formed a link between the outbreak of Covid-19 and the lab at Wuhan during his remark on Coronavirus task force on 17 April (The White House, Remarks, 2020). Hence, these four speeches are remarks on the Lab origin of Covid-19, and by the order of reaction of the one to the other speech these speeches altogether form a discourse of Lab origin theory.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of analysing the linguistic construct of these speeches, the study follows the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak, 2013). The study utilizes several CDA methods such as presupposition, verb processes, modality and hedging (Machin and Mayr, 2012, pp. 15-186). Presupposition is the “‘already-said’ or ‘preconstructed’” meaning in the text (Fairclough, 1995, p. 27) which is also an implied proposition in the discourse. Such proposition can be located in the lexical choices and grammatical structure. The grammatical structure in which lexical choices are made makes deliberate use of verb processes. The verb processes are the special uses of verbs with specific connotations such as the intention, manner, attitude and relation of the speaker. Depending on the verb processes there exist four kinds of verbs, i.e. metapositional, metalinguistic, descriptive, and transcript. Metapositional verbs disclose a complimentary explanation of the word; metalinguistic verbs point out the kind of language the speaker uses; descriptive verbs indicate the form of interaction; and the transcript verbs demonstrate the points of development in the discourse. Whereas the verb processes reveal the motif of the speaker in relation to the lexical choices, modality and hedging inform the commitment of the speaker. Modality, in particular epistemic modality, indicates the speaker’s judgment of facticity in the proposition. In complicated situations the speaker may want to avoid the facticity of statement and use hedging. Hedging is a linguistic strategy of creating ambiguity in the statement by forming distance or dissolving the relation between the speaker and the statement. In regards to the discourse of post-truth the relation between the speaker and the discourse is a prime concern because such relation constitutes [post] truth of the statement.

In this study, the select four speeches are delivered by the politicians and diplomat and, therefore, it can be presupposed that these speeches are ideologically motivated and politically manipulated. These ideological motives and political manipulation build models (i.e. themes) at the level of language. Models are “mental representations of experiences, events or situations, as well as the opinions we have about them” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 258). There are two types of models – mental and contextual. Mental model is “a dynamic symbolic representation of external objects or events” (Rickheit and Sichelschmidt, 1999, p. 9). Contextual models are the extension of mental models which emerge in the speech when the discourse participants interpret an event or information subjectively (van Dijk, 1999, pp. 124-125). With the help of CDA, the study finds models in the selected speeches.

In the following discourse, the speakers communicate models with specific linguistic strategies that transform subjective interpretations and hypothetical assumptions into firm assertions and convictions. Such CDA tools as a presupposition, verb processes, modality, and hedging reveal the effect of the linguistic strategies on the discourse by exposing the speakers' motifs in language use.

POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF COVID-19: A SPIN OF CONVICTION

The idea of post-truth is based on the concern that facts are selective and presented in a political context. The context turns out to be political in its linguistic construct by selecting, emphasizing, and elaborating certain facts while excluding others. For example, Mustafa and Pilus (2020) has shown that National Canadian online news sites have employed the linguistic devices of deixis, metaphor, lexical choices and naming to define the Refugee Resettlement Initiative of the Canadian Govt. both as a success and a failure. Hence, the politics of framing the truth turns its factual presentation into a controversy. The disagreements in the opinions on an event often form a dialogue, a sort of verbal exchange between divergent presentations of the event. In reference to post-truth such opinions end up with a political spin. The phrase

“political spin” is taken from Lee McIntyre (2018) book Post-Truth. McIntyre (2018, p. 6) uses the phrase to highlight a unique epistemological character of post-truth, that is, beyond the binary of truth/lie. Post-truth isn't a lie but a compromise between fact and belief. In the context of Brexit Vote and U.S. Presidential electoral campaign, McIntyre finds in post-truth a political motive stated in the form of conviction. In the following analysis the select four speeches are sequenced by date in the manner of turn-taking or response to a particular speech to construct the overall discourse on the origin of Covid-19. The analysis of lexical choices and their discursive effect aims at evaluating the post-truth or political motives in the form of conviction inherent in the linguistic properties of the statements of the top officials by U.S. and China.

SPEECH 1

THE WUHAN LAB ORIGIN

On 30 January 2020, Senator Tom Cotton discusses gravity of Covid-19 in Senate of Arkansas state with Intelligence and Armed Services Committee:

“This coronavirus is a catastrophe on the scale of Chernobyl for China, but actually it's probably worse than Chernobyl which was localized in its effects the coronavirus could result in a global pandemic while you are all sleeping overnight the number of diagnosed cases in China increased by 30% now. . . .there's still many unknowns this virus could have - both a long incubation period as much as 14 days and individuals could be contagious while asymptomatic which was not the case with SARS in 2003. . . .yet China is still lying about this. They've been lying about from the very beginning and you don't need their history of lying about SARS in 2003 though it is relevant here you just have to see what's happened over the last two months. . . .They also claimed for almost two months until earlier this week that it had originated in a seafood market in Wuhan that locals have contracted it from animals and say bat soup or snake tartar that is not the case. The case Lancet published study last weekend demonstrating that of the original 40 cases 14 cases of them had no contact with the seafood market including patient zero as one epidemiologist said that virus went into the seafood market before it came out of a seafood market. We still don't know where it originated - it could have been another seafood market could have been a farm, could have been a food processing company. I would note that China or that Wuhan also has China's only biosafety level-4 laboratory that works with the world's most deadly pathogens to include yes coronavirus. . . .That's why it is essential that we immediately stop all travel on commercial aircraft between China and the United States making exceptions of course for American citizens to come back as we just brought back yesterday allowing a central trade to flow as long as cruise on ships and aircraft are not allowed to go into the general population in American and making exception of course for medical personnel to go into China to try to get a handle of this. It is essential that we take those steps an essential that we get to the bottom of China's deceit and incompetence on this”
(Cotton, 2020)

In the speech, Senator Cotton introduces the cause, history, magnitude of China's relation to Covid-19 and the preventive measures on it. He begins the speech with a comparison between Covid-19 and Chernobyl. The comparison proposes the magnitude of Covid-19 by categorizing it with a catastrophe like Chernobyl. The comparison enlists a number of lexical choices: “catastrophe,” “Chernobyl,” “worse,” and “pandemic.” These selective lexicons have many implicit suggestions that on the semiotic level inspire a mental model of a communist plot to destroy America. But the model of the plot has been built on multiple contextually interlinked premises: one, Covid-19 is more devastating than Chernobyl because “it's probably worse than Chernobyl which was localized in its effects” and thus heightening the concern of it in greater terms; two, Chernobyl is a man-made disaster. So a comparison forms a relation between Covid-19 and man-made disasters and downplays the rhetoric for a natural origin of the virus; three, Chernobyl took place in Russia and the relation groups Russia and China together as a threat whose origin is deeply political. The nature of such comparison invokes

bitter antipathy and antagonism that anti-communists share. The relation between Covid-19 and Chernobyl is materialized on diverse discursive strategies: one, rhetorical trope of oxymoron, “actually it’s probably,” concretizes the apprehension of a disaster; two, structural opposition of “localized” Chernobyl with “global” Covid-19 aggravates the concern; three, the epistemic modality – “could”- ascertains the imminence of a disaster. Therefore, Cotton’s speech is discursively charged with political motives of publicizing and exaggerating the concern for Covid-19.

Then he proposes that Covid-19 is an immoral and villainous act of China. The proposition involves twin presuppositions: one, Covid-19 is a man-made disaster by China; and two, the disaster is aimed at America which is immoral and villainous in its execution. The spread of the virus is analogized with attacking a sleeping population. By the analogy of attacking a sleeping enemy, the Americans, Cotton declares the outbreak of Covid-19 a war on Americans, a villainous act, by China and the growth of pandemic overnight an immoral act committed by China of attacking the unsuspecting Americans. Cotton also establishes China’s role in the pandemic by her act of “lying.”

The history of China’s lying is traced back to the outbreak of SARS, a variant of coronavirus, and China’s duplicitous role is made evident rhetorically in the context of SARS. Though SARS has resulted from an animal to human transmission, “a small number of cases have occurred as a result of laboratory accidents” (WHO, 2004). The reference to SARS, then, implies such laboratory accidents with Covid-19 and the act of lying indicates such accidents to have been covered up. The suggestion of lying about an accidental leakage of Covid-19 from a laboratory is reinforced in the claim that Covid-19 has “originated in a seafood market in Wuhan.” Here Cotton uses a metapositional verb, “claim,” to ground the premises of his doubt that is confirmed in the medical research, an unmentioned article published “last weekend” in *The Lancet*: “of the original 40 cases 14 cases of them had no contact with the seafood market including patient zero” and the virus existed before its outbreak in Wuhan seafood market. To examine Cotton’s claim, the researcher visits *The Lancet* and finds seven articles published on 24 January 2020 and selects an article which mentions a study on 41 patients. Here, Cotton seems to have conflated the findings of the article, “Clinical Features of Patients Infected with 2019 Novel Coronavirus in Wuhan, China,” with the hypothetical conclusion that “virus went into the seafood market before it came out of a seafood market.” The article contends that “[out of] 41 admitted hospital patients...27 (66%) patients had direct exposure to Huanan seafood market” and holds market exposure a characteristic of the infection (Huang et al., 2020, p. 500). The article doesn’t reflect on the other source of outbreak in the case of remaining 14 cases that weren’t exposed to Wuhan seafood market. Therefore, Cotton’s propositions emerge from a speculation that the article doesn’t address in regards to 14 cases.

Cotton’s speculation holds the following premises to be true: one, there are some original 40 cases while the article has studied on 41 cases admitted by 2nd Jan, 2020 and doesn’t state that 41 admitted patients were original cases; two, there is no mention of the alternative source of outbreak in a farm or food processing unit. To justify these premises, he forms a contextual model of Chinese diet that includes “bat” and “snake” and the production or processing unit of such animal-based product. This model reflects and performs “Sinophobia” that has emerged coincidentally with covid-19 (Schild et al., 2020, pp. 1-14). He also adds another speculative scenario that involves “China’s only biosafety level-4 laboratory” in Wuhan. Just as farm or food processing unit the Wuhan institute of Virology offers a viable medium of contact between animals and humans. To emphasize the relation Cotton mentions the lab’s activity with “the world’s most deadly pathogens to include yes coronavirus.” The sentence comprises of multiple grammatical units that bind several premises into one conclusion that the lab has a definite role in the outbreak at Wuhan: one, he contends that the

lab “works” to “include” coronavirus. Here the metalinguistic verb, “work,” and the infinitive transcript verb, “to include,” impress the idea that the lab has an agenda inspired by directives other than medical research such as military goal of developing (bio)-weapon; two, the exclamation, “yes,” reinforces the idea that coronavirus, the source of present pandemic, is part of the institute’s research objectives and the pandemic is the outcome of such objectives; and three, the phrase “deadly pathogens” proposes the life-threatening consequences of such research. Pathogen is a microorganism that causes disease and the coupling with an adjective “deadly” implies the biomedical form of a militant weapon that can pose fatality and disorder simultaneously. Here the implications refer to Cotton’s previous analogy of “sleeping” Americans and posits that the Americans are attacked by a bioweapon called Covid-19. Therefore, he recommends two essential measures: one, “stop[ing]” all travel to and from China; and two, letting the medical personnel “go” to China in order to “get a handle of this [the outbreak].” The second recommendation is grounded in all the above-mentioned premises that confirm his conviction of “China’s deceit and incompetence.”

SPEECH 2

COUNTERING THE WUHAN LAB ORIGIN

Cui Tiankai, on the other hand, refutes the alleged claim of Covid-19 being a bioweapon of China on the “Face the Nation” program on 9th Feb:

“...it’s true that a lot is still unknown and our scientists, Chinese scientists, American scientists, and scientists of other countries are doing their best to know more about the virus but it’s very harmful its very dangerous to stir up suspicions rumours and spread them among the people for this will create panic another thing is that it will fan up racial discrimination, xenophobia, all these...will harm our effort to combat the virus. Of course there are all kinds of speculations and rumours...that this virus is coming from some military lab not of China may be in United States. How can we believe all these crazy things...absolutely crazy...we still don’t know yet. According to initial outcome of the research probably coming from some animals but we have to discover more about it”.

(Face the Nation, 2020)

Here, Ambassador Cui formulates his counter-argument on the logic of rumor. First he dismisses the allegation with the argument that the allegation is a rumor. The argument begins with an epistemic modality, “it’s true,” and continues with a hedge “a lot” to form his conviction that scientific facts and hypothetical assertions in Senator Cotton’s speech are contentious because the researches on the virus are still inconclusive. Then he mentions and therefore, validates another rumor, “this virus is coming from some military lab ... in United States,” to counter the allegation. The logic behind the counter-argument is a notable and significant diplomatic tactic in the context of Covid-19 because it combines several vested political interests: one, of downplaying the concerns with China’s role in spreading the virus globally; two, of arguing for China’s irreproachability in the cause of the pandemic; three, of shifting the focus from China’s political and institutional failure to contain and eradicate the virus within its territory to natural virulence and tendency of the virus to spread exponentially and the scientific and medical failures to tackle its spread; and four, of accounting America for the global tendency to suspect China. The Ambassador points out the harmfulness of such allegation and likens the rumors with the virus because like the virus rumors spread among people and create “panic” and hatred in the form of “racial discrimination, [and] xenophobia.” He uses the plural noun “we” to include the supporters of such controversy and duly criticizes them on the question of validity and justification with the metapropositional verb, “believe.” He also calls the rumors and its practice in the context of the virus “absolutely crazy.” The allegation of Senator Cotton is crazy because it’s devoid of scientific truth and therefore

irrational. Hence, the adjective, “crazy,” reiterates the undertone of political interests of Chinese diplomacy to declare all blames baseless.

SPEECH 3

THE U.S. LAB ORIGIN

Complying with the Ambassador Cui, Lijian Zhao validates the counter-rumor in a tweet on 12 March:

“CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!” (Zhao, 2020)

Lijian Zhao’s response on Twitter elicits the vital importance of checking social media during Covid-19 (Garrett, 2020, pp. 942-943). But outside the official organ of press-release his tweet encourages the Twitter users “with the spreading of COVID-19 misinformation” (Shahi et al., 2020, p. 1). It serves twin diplomatic purposes: one, of manipulating social perception of China’s role in the outbreak which Twitter can contribute with the “users’ preferences and attitudes, algorithms ... [in] content promotion and thus information spreading” (Cinelli et al., 2020, p. 2) and two, of categorizing all anti-Chinese narratives as misinformation. The tweet raises a series of controversies to substantiate the rumor on the origin of the virus in U.S. In the tweet he uses only one declarative sentence. The sentence, “CDC was caught on the spot” conceals the agent of discovery and in the foreground the exposure of CDC is made possible with the material process of the metapositional verb “catch.” The lexicon “catch” encumbers the declaration with a presupposition that many facts and events are being covered up. The presupposition of U.S. cover-up is further foregrounded in multiple contextual models—patient zero, number of patients, hospitals, role of U.S. army in the outbreak, cover-up and accountability. Each of these contextual models is constituted in interrogative or exclamatory sentences. The nature of sentences reveals their unique semantic impact. The first four interrogative sentences build a contrary mental model of Wuhan lab origin theory. In it, the virus has travelled from U.S. and U.S. army is the transporter of the virus. The facts concerning patient zero, infection, and hospital are ambiguous since they are not furnished with adequate information such as the geographical location. The facts are confused with inconclusive scientific investigation into the origin of Covid-19 including the patient zero. The rest of the exclamatory sentences accuse U.S. of secrecy and accountability for the epidemic. Once again the suggestions are made discursively forceful and powerful in the manipulation of details like agency, location, authority and validity of the controversial events.

SPEECH 4

THE WUHAN LAB ORIGIN RE-CONFIRMED

Finally, on 17 April 2020 President Trump adds more speculative details that deny the natural origin of the virus during a press briefing on the Coronavirus Task Force:

“Well, we’re looking at that. A lot of people are looking at it. It seems to make sense. They talk about a certain kind of bat, but that bat wasn’t in that area. If you can believe this, that’s what they’re down to now, is bats. But that bat is not in that area. That bat wasn’t sold at that wet zone. It wasn’t sold there. That bat is 40 miles away. So a lot of strange things are happening, but there is a lot of investigation going on and we’re going to find out”. (The White House, 2020)

Responding to a question - “The investigation into whether the virus escaped from this lab in Wuhan, how active is that?” - President Trump corroborates Senator Cotton’s conviction. He uses a number of hedges to avoid the necessity of providing factual evidences with his remark: “a lot of people,” “a certain kind of bat,” “they are down,” and “a lot of strange things.” These hedges not only constitute strategic ambiguity but also make the statement more persuasive in the context of bats. Discursively, the speech depends on the presupposition that “a certain kind of bat” is responsible for the human transmission of virus. But the presupposition also informs the mental model of Wuhan lab origin theory. Since the bats are not available naturally and commercially at the place of outbreak, the Wuhan seafood market, therefore the virus has other source of origin. The connection between the other source of origin of Covid-19 than the bats and the Wuhan lab is established by two lexical choices – “believe” and “strange.” Both of the words shift the semantic emphasis from scientific reasoning to unsubstantial assumptions. Hence, at the semantic level the speech exemplifies one of the “Trump’s anti-scientific pronouncements during covid-19” (Yamey and Gonsalves, 2020, p. 1).

In both of the contrary theories on the origin of Covid-19, Senator Cotton and President Trump in U.S. and Cui Tiankai and Lijian Zhao in China share a common trait, that is, a truth-claim on the basis of assumption. Here the nature of truth is problematic because even without scientific evidence and factual substance their claim can’t be considered false because they don’t claim to be true but express the assertions on the basis of belief which are grounded in hypothetical premises. Therefore, the exchange of statements between U.S. and China consisting of “accusations of slow public health responses, misinformation, media suppression and conspiracy theories...politicise the origin and impact of the COVID-19 virus” (Davey, 2020, p.1) and create a discursive environment where the truth is stripped of factual and empirical investigation and emotion and personal belief usher in the phenomenon of Post-truth.

CONCLUSION

The Lab origin theory is a mental model based on the controversial statements by Senior Cotton and President Trump of the U.S. and Lijian Zhao and Cui Tiankai of China. Both U.S. and China have built separate origin theories and accuse the other of its origin and cover-up.

The theories are baseless and solely rely on inconclusive scientific findings and hypothetical conclusions from the on-going investigations. The hypothetical conclusions form the ground for assumption and speculation over the origin of Covid-19. The speculative assertions are inspired by implicit political and ideological interests of representation, domination and exercise of power. In the context of Covid-19, the power-politics between the U.S. and China constitute the background of the controversies and rumors of the lab origin theory.

Both the U.S. and China have operated their political goal of manipulation, control, and (re)production of facts. The relation between the origin of the virus and the on-going scientific experiments on different strains of coronavirus in highly secure labs is established on the basis of diverse discursive strategies: mental and contextual models, semantic choices, verb processes, rhetoric, presupposition, modality and hedges. These discursive practices manipulate the existing knowledge on Covid-19 to convince the public a politically twisted narrative on the virus. The sole purpose of such political accomplishments is to accuse the foreign country and to divert the focus from medical emergency to international politics.

The mutually identical discursive and political practice of manipulation, in effect, destroys the validity and truth of political discourse in general, and that of Covid-19 in particular. The facticity and truth of such political discourse are, therefore, to be interpreted with the discourse of Post-truth. In the Wuhan Lab origin theory, Senator Cotton and President

Trump never claim to be true but suggest the ground of their assumption and belief which are aimed to form a mental map of Covid-19 being a communist plot. Similarly Lijian Zhao and Cui Tiankai in the U.S. origin theory avoid direct confrontation with justification of their statements by resorting to discursive techniques of presupposition, hedges and modality. Their support of controversies against U.S. draws a contrary mental map of Covid-19 being an occasion of U.S. politics to defame China. Hence, the political discourse on the lab origins of Covid-19 is a post-truth discourse of politics.

The Lab origin theories of Covid-19 are controversies and discourses of political manipulation. These discourses are grounded not in facts but in post-truth. Post-truth being a validating factor in these discourses underlines the necessity of criticality in the present century and of CDA in understanding political speeches. The present analysis shows that Covid-19 has created not only a medical emergency but also a political crisis of facts and credibility. This political crisis can be addressed through a critical understanding of events and speeches as the study exemplifies. The Lab origin theory of the virus, if critically understood, is just a rhetorical trope of international politics in the exercise and domination of power between the U.S. and China. The study has resurfaced the politics in the selected four speeches which has motivated the usages of discursive strategies to formulate an impact on the semantic level. Therefore, the truth-claims of the lab-origin of Covid-19 are speculative assumptions and the exchanges of controversies between the U.S. and China are a political spin of conviction.

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